

On Confronting Myself and the World

Mark Goldowsky

I want to make a statement, a declaration. My dictionary defines a “statement” as a communication through speech or writing, a setting out of facts and particulars. The “fact” I want to declare is that for the past aeon I’ve been a mental patient. The “particular” of this fact is that I and millions of others like me are not going to take the unwarranted abuse anymore.

It is possible for mental patients to hide their illness from the world. No one need ever know, for we can “pass” as normal. Many—not all—of us do this. But I, for one, will no longer deny my condition nor accept the personal indignities put upon me.

My sociologist friend reminded me that we are not only mental patients, we are also writers, doctors, fishermen, husbands, wives, and children. For so many of us, mental problems are really just a fragment of our being. But sometimes societal pressures make our condition a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Let me step down from the pulpit and go back in time. I’m eight years old, and my mother is holding me in her arms as we cross the street to visit the allergist. (I must have been heavy for her to carry, but I belonged to her—heart, body, and soul.) Why am I going to the allergist? You see, every Sunday evening I would get a stomachache. Why Sunday? Because school began on Monday, and I couldn’t tolerate the thought of that. The last solace of Sunday was the Yankees game on the radio—when that was through, I had nothing.

Somehow, my mother thought the allergist should give me treatment,

that my stomachaches were due to an allergy. (Funny that stomach days were always Sundays.) Dr. G was my pediatrician and allergist. As is often the case, there was a thread of truth to these visits—some scratch tests showed I was allergic to pollen and a few other things. Every week my mother and I would be in Dr. G’s office, always with the same story: “Mark has a stomachache, so I kept him home Monday. Tuesday was a little better, so I sent him to school. He caught up on his school work.”

Dr. G wrote everything down in my file. I guess he wrote down the same thing every week. I had so many injections in my right shoulder that the doctor had to move on to the left one. This went on for years. My brother cruelly asked, “Why does Mark stay home every Monday? If I have to go to school, he should have to go to school too!”

Then it happened: I was running a fever, a fairly high one. My father sent me to my parents’ big mahogany bed. Only bad things like fevers and nightmares would get you into the big bed. Then I heard a knock on the door. My father let this man in, and I heard mumbling. The man—a doctor—asked me whether I had stomach pain, and I told him I did. He pushed his fingers into the lower right part of my abdomen and asked if it hurt. “Yes, some,” I said. “It hurts where you touch.”

Then my father left the bedroom with the doctor. I heard more mumbling and knew that an accord had been reached. When my father returned, he said “Mark, we will solve this whole thing. You won’t have any more stomachaches.” He spoke in a kind, somewhat comforting voice, and I started to wonder what he meant. Then I knew: my appendix was going to be taken out. (Actually, I knew full well that my Sunday-

evening stomachaches had no more to do with my appendix than with the man in the moon, but I wouldn’t—couldn’t—let myself say anything. There was never any real emotional communication in my family. We each had a role to play, and there was no room for talking about how you feel. Only politics, chemistry, Republicans, and Democrats.)

Up drove the ambulance. I was carried into it gently. I thought to myself, What’s going to happen to me? I called out “Daddy, where are you?”

Then I was lying on a mobile cart in the hospital. Rickety-rackety down the corridor we went. I wanted to tell the surgeon and the other people around me that this was crazy, but I couldn’t speak. The assistants put me on the operating table. The doctor said, “Mark, we are going to help you. Count down from one hundred.” I started to wonder how many numbers I could say quickly. I wanted to be a numbers champion. I got down to 80. Then I felt a sneeze coming on, so I couldn’t speak, yet I couldn’t complete the sneeze. I heard the surgeon ask the nurse for a scalpel. But I was still awake! I was terrified that they were going to cut into me, like a wounded cowboy from an old Western movie. Miraculously, just at that moment I comatosely uttered “seventy-nine.”

After my appendix operation, some thought I was free. No more stomachaches. But come Sunday, it was business as usual.

Jump ahead a decade or two. I am lying in bed at home when a policeman comes in and asks, “Are you gonna go nice, or are you gonna go hard?” Viewing the policeman in the hall, a large pistol in his holster and a couple of assistants lurking about, I decided to go without incident. I was usually happy to do what other peo-

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ple wanted—happy to learn better ways of fielding grounders, better ways of appreciating poetry.

As we approached the Grasslands psychiatric observation ward, the ambulance attendants stared at me, just as I expected them to. They didn't say a word. I looked around and thought, What beautiful grass. "Boy," I said—the one word I was able to emit from my tightening throat. Then we entered the building and I was brought into a lighted room with an oak door. I stripped and was lifted onto the examining table. I felt the doctor's cold hands grasping my abdomen and pounding my back. Then I put my pajamas back on and left for the hall, my debilitated legs no longer fully supporting me. I laid my head on a table for a little relief.

Then came an announcement that it was time for all the patients to take their medication, and there was a slow rush to the left. I noticed an orange pill with some small numbers written on it—a tranquilizer. All the patients got the same pill and the same dose. These tranquilizers were totally inadequate. "Is this poison?" I asked. A gray-haired man with straight wrinkles on his face said nothing while firmly holding a cup toward me. The pill didn't go down all the way, there was so little to drink. Then we got our forks, rounded knives, spoons, pork chops, mashed potatoes, and greens. But the pill was a blade in my chest. I couldn't eat. I thought I needed medical attention.

As the day progressed, I gathered I was not doing what I should have been doing. "You're going into isolation if you ask for the doctor once more," said the gray-haired man. I thumped my head against the wall and ended up in isolation, where there was a bare mattress and a locked door with a window on it. I had no clothes. But I got to lie down undisturbed. About 15 minutes later, I was out of isolation. The tension reached to the limit of every limb. I started to cry, walking to the end of the hall so they couldn't see me.

Time passed, and I got a shot in the buttocks from the gray-haired man. "Take down your drawers!" he

said. Ram, in it went. (Of course, I now know that this was sleep medication.) At 4:00 a.m., I was up. I opened my door and all was quiet. I walked, but very gently. The pain shot through my buttocks. "Go back to your room!" ordered the gray-haired man. But after 20 minutes I was out of my room again. I was eventually given another pill. "Swallow this pill and go back to sleep!" said the man. I trudged back, half crawling, lifted the sheets, and fell asleep.

That morning I was up at 6:00 a.m. with everyone else. The night shift was leaving for the day. I was having trouble keeping my eyes open because of the needle and my disturbed sleep. The gray-haired man's lips moved slightly, and his eyes widened. "Let him have an extra half-hour's sleep," he said softly. He was warm now, his wrinkles pleasant-

ly furrowed in his face. I thought, You good man. Although the pain was still shooting through my rear end, even worse than before, I fell asleep.

On the seventh morning, I entered a large room. There sat psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and others. They said in near unison, "Mark, you will never think clearly again. That's how sick you are." I didn't say a word, but I knew they were wrong.

On the eighth morning they told me I would be leaving on Monday for a private hospital. Warmth streamed down through my rigid arms to my stiff fingers. On Monday I walked out the door and mused to myself, What beautiful green grass. Monday had come, and I was safe.

But it was a long time after that before Mondays were really safe. ♦

PRACTICAL GERIATRICS

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service to caregivers of persons with dementia. The results of such research would assist practitioners in establishing more effective respite services for these patients. ♦

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